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Source: *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 121, No. 4 (Winter, 2000), pp. 593-627

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](http://www.jhu.edu/)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1561728>

Accessed: 06/05/2013 21:36

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# TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF READING IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

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IN THE LAST CENTURY, scholarly debate on ancient reading has largely revolved around the question “Did the ancient Greeks and Romans read aloud or silently?” Given the recent work of Gavrilov and Burnyeat, which has set the debate on new, seemingly firmer, footing, the question is at first glance easily answered.<sup>1</sup> Without hesitation we can now assert that there was no cognitive difficulty when fully literate ancient readers wished to read silently to themselves, and that the cognitive act of silent reading was neither extraordinary nor noticeably unusual in antiquity. This conclusion has been known to careful readers since at least 1968, when Bernard Knox demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that the silent reading of ancient documentary texts, including letters, is accepted by ancient witnesses as an ordinary event.<sup>2</sup> Gavrilov and Burnyeat have improved the evidential base, by refining interpretation (especially Gavrilov on Augustine), by focusing on neglected but important evidence (Burnyeat on Ptolemy), and by adding observations from cognitive psychology.<sup>3</sup> The resulting clarity is salutary.

Yet I suspect many will be dissatisfied with the terms in which the debate has been couched. I know that I am. Can we be content with a discussion framed in such a narrow—if not blinkered—fashion? In the fury of battle, the terms of the dispute have crystallized in an unfortunate way. That is, the polemics are such that we are now presumed fools if we suppose that the ancients were not *able* to read silently. But is it

<sup>1</sup>Gavrilov 1997; Burnyeat 1997.

<sup>2</sup>Knox 1968; “at least” since Knox’s conclusions are (as he acknowledges) in part anticipated by the more cautious reading of the evidence in Hendrickson 1929, by Clark 1931, who argues briefly but vigorously against the notion that silent reading was extraordinary in antiquity, and by Turner 1952 (14 n. 4), who adduced evidence for silent reading in classical Athens.

<sup>3</sup>Gavrilov 1997, 61–66 (on Augustine), 58–61 (on cognitive psychology); Burnyeat 1997.

ignorant or foolish to insist that in certain contexts reading aloud was central? In any case, and much more important, are these in fact the right questions to be asking? The moment has arrived, I think, when we need to reconsider whether the scholarly discourse is furthering what, I take it, is the goal: namely, understanding ancient reading. As a preliminary, and so that we can call to mind clearly the curious juncture to which we have now arrived, it will be useful first to review briefly how we have come to such a pass—in which sociological consideration of ancient reading is typically conceived within the terms of a debate over silent reading.

### DID THE ANCIENTS READ SILENTLY OR ALOUD? THE STRANGE HISTORY OF A CONTROVERSY

The roots of the debate are set in Eduard Norden's *Die antike Kunstprosa*, an influential work whose first edition in 1898 brought to scholarly attention a famous passage in Augustine (6.3.3)—wherein, it appears, Augustine finds it “unbegreiflich” that his bishop and teacher Ambrose reads silently to himself.<sup>4</sup> At issue for Norden is not the idea that the ancients were unable to read silently, but rather that reading aloud of literary texts was the norm throughout antiquity.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Norden 1898, 6. The passage runs: “When Ambrose read, his eyes ran over the columns of writing and his heart searched out the meaning, but his voice and his tongue were at rest. Often when I was present—for he did not close his door to anyone and it was customary to come in unannounced—I have seen him reading silently, never in fact otherwise. I would sit for a long time in silence, not daring to disturb someone so deep in thought, and then go on my way. I asked myself why he read in this way. Was it that he did not wish to be interrupted in those rare moments he found to refresh his mind and rest from the tumult of others’ affairs? Or perhaps he was worried that he would have to explain obscurities in the text to some eager listener, or discuss other difficult problems? For he would thereby lose time and be prevented from reading as much as he had planned. But the preservation of his voice, which easily became hoarse, may well have been the true cause of his silent reading.”

<sup>5</sup>Observations on the Augustine passage form the conclusion to a lengthy paragraph whose theme sentence begins, “Wir haben aus dem Altertum selbst einige Zeugnisse für die Sensibilität der Menschen jener Zeit gegenüber der Musik des gesprochenen Wortes”: Norden 1923, 5–6. Starting with the second edition, Norden collects passages exemplifying “die Gewohnheit lauten Lesens” in an appendix; see Norden 1923, 451–53. Before Norden, the importance of reading ancient literary texts aloud is already frequently propounded: e.g., Balogh 1927, 85, on F. Nietzsche; Hendrickson 1929, 192–93, on C. M. Wieland; Norden 1923, 6, on E. Rohde; cf. Gavrilov 1997, 57.

The controversy fully engages in 1927,<sup>6</sup> when Josef Balogh (“*Voces Paginarum*”) makes now a much broader case: that for all texts (not simply literary texts) silent reading was rare, that silent reading when it did happen occasioned surprise, and that silent reading was possible only under extraordinary circumstances and by extraordinary people (such as Julius Caesar or Saint Ambrose). To support his conclusion, Balogh marshals a large array of evidence: a dozen or so passages to support his claim that silent reading was viewed by the ancients as an aberration (84–95); another dozen passages claimed as direct evidence for the reading aloud of texts (97–109); passages where reading is equated with hearing, or where the acoustic effect of a text is assumed (95–97, 202–14); and others. Anyone who has read Balogh’s article with attention will readily discern the tendentious way in which he often presents highly ambiguous evidence; as well as his heavy reliance on late sources. But the very weight of the material—sixty-four pages!—wins the day. With the striking Augustine passage as prime witness (86), Balogh succeeds in convincing a couple of generations of scholars. Along the way Balogh introduces, almost as an aside, a point that will become central. For he links the phenomenon of reading aloud with *scriptio continua*, that peculiar ancient habit of writing literary texts without spaces between the words (227). A *technological* explanation now clarifies why the ancients read aloud. The ancient reader reads aloud *by necessity*: faced with an undifferentiated sequence of letters, the ancient reader finds it difficult, if not impossible, to see the word shapes, and thus for all but extraordinary readers sounding the letters aloud is the only way to make sense of the text.

As the decades pass, with only the gradual accretion of the odd piece of evidence or counterevidence,<sup>7</sup> acceptance grows that Balogh has successfully identified a hitherto unknown “fact” about antiquity: the ancients always read their texts aloud, and silent reading of these

<sup>6</sup>The original version of Balogh’s article was published in Hungarian in 1921 (Knox 1968, 421). Independently (see 182 n. 1) in 1929, G. L. Hendrickson (“Ancient Reading”) published a similar analysis of ancient reading, which is however much briefer, more cautious in its conclusions, and far less influential.

<sup>7</sup>Lesser contributions to the accumulation and analysis of evidence, not included in the survey here: Wohleb 1929; Clark 1931 (an early dissenter against the view that silent reading was extraordinary); McCartney 1948; Turner 1952, 14; Di Capua 1953; Stanford 1967, 2; Allan 1980; Starr 1990–91; Schenkeveld 1991, 1992; Burnyeat 1991 (in anticipation of Burnyeat 1997); Slusser 1992; Horsfall 1993; Gilliard 1993 (reacting to Achtemeier 1990); Johnson 1994; Gilliard 1997.

texts was both difficult and extraordinary. By 1968 Bernard Knox ("Silent Reading in Antiquity") seems to feel it necessary to hold no punches in his effort to dislodge what is now the *communis opinio*. In a spirited and systematic attack, Knox offers point-by-point refutation of Balogh's main points and adds evidence of his own to demonstrate that—however the case may stand with literary texts—ancient letters and documentary texts certainly *were* able to be read silently. Once the dust settles, very little is left of Balogh's edifice. Augustine's wonderment at Ambrose's silent reading still stands tall as "Exhibit A"<sup>8</sup> for the notion that silent reading occasioned surprise in antiquity. The Acontius and Cydippe story (Callimachus *Aetia* fr. 67 Pf. with Dig.; Ovid *Heroid.* 20, cf. *Heroid.* 21.1ff.) continues to be cited, despite Knox's rough treatment.<sup>9</sup> But so much doubt has been cast on the other chief classical passages (such as Horace *Satires* 1.3.64–65, 1.6.122–23, 2.7.1–2; Lucian *Adv. Indoct.* 2) that these are now largely abandoned. On the other side, the evidence for silent reading of letters seems suddenly secure. Two of Knox's examples seem particularly unassailable. At Aristophanes' *Knights* 115ff., the comedy of the scene depends on the image of a man (Demosthenes) totally absorbed in the silent reading of a letter. As for the other example—evidence as unambiguous as one can hope for—a riddle from Antiphanes' comedy *Sappho* (Athenaeus, X 73, 450e–451b) runs, "What is it that is female in nature and has children under the folds of her garments, and these children, though voiceless, set up a ringing shout . . . to those mortals they wish to, but others, even when present, are not permitted to hear?" The answer is a letter (ἡ ἐπιστολή), a feminine noun whose children are the letters of the alphabet. "Though voiceless, they speak to those far away, those they wish to, but if anyone happens to be standing near the man who is reading he will not hear him" (trans. after Knox, 432–33). Knox has made it

<sup>8</sup>Knox's words, 422. Knox's argument against the passage (that as a poor African provincial Augustine may not have known about silent reading, 422) has not proven convincing.

<sup>9</sup>Discussion at Knox 1968, 430–31; L. Koenen contra Knox, in Johnson 1994, 67 n. 5; Gavrillov 1997, 72. That Acontius' inscription is written on an apple (whose rotation prevents reading ahead in the sentence) is perhaps worth remark. But physical causation and verisimilitude are largely beside the point. Readers in the twenty-first century do not stop and ask why Cydippe reads the apple aloud, and I suppose readers in antiquity were accepting of the fairy-tale conditions of the story in much the same way. In any case, jumping from a folktale motif to generalizations about reading habits seems perilous at best.

clear then that in the case of letters, at least, silent reading is possible, and probably usual. The notion that silent reading was difficult or extraordinary in classical antiquity now depends more or less solely on the single passage in Augustine.

The reaction in the scholarly community to Knox's argument is curious. A great many, even while now accepting that silent reading occurred when people read letters and documents, continue to regard the ancient book as an alien artifact for these "early" readers, one which because of its strange physical properties *must* be read aloud. Witness, for instance, G. Cavallo and F. Hild in a recent (1997) volume of *Der neue Pauly*: "In antiquity the most usual way to read a book was out loud. . . . A good reading was almost like the interpretation of a musical score. Excepting very experienced or professional readers, the lection of a book was a difficult process: the text presented itself in *scriptio continua*, and was only seldom and irregularly articulated by marks of punctuation, so that the eyes only with difficulty could distinguish word boundaries or the sense of the whole sentence."<sup>10</sup> Less careful scholars ignore Knox more or less outright, and the notion that the ancients could only read aloud continues with a mysterious vigor.<sup>11</sup>

In this context I jump to the recent (and rather strange) climax of the controversy, in 1997. In that year, a medievalist, Paul Saenger, publishes a book (*Spaces between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*)<sup>12</sup> in which he begins with an analysis of the "physiology of reading" in ancient and medieval times (1–17). Assuming that reading aloud was the

<sup>10</sup>*Der neue Pauly: Enzyklopädie der Antike* 2.815, s.v. *Buch* (the common simile of the musical score originates in Hendrickson 1929, 184). Similarly, E. J. Kenney in the *Cambridge History of Latin Literature*, 12: "In general it may be taken for granted that throughout antiquity books were written to be read aloud. . . . It might be said without undue exaggeration that a book of poetry or artistic prose was not simply a text in the modern sense but something like a score for public or private performance." Kenney's remarks are quoted by Gavrilov (1997, 56), in the introduction to his article—somewhat tendentiously since the quotation is supposed to buttress Gavrilov's assertion of widespread acceptance among classicists that the Greeks and Romans "did not read to themselves silently, save in rare and special cases." Kenney however carefully restricts his comments to the reading aloud of *literary* texts.

<sup>11</sup>A startling example is the naive summary of the debate, which serves then as the basis for a study of New Testament texts, in Achtemeier 1990 (who seems unaware of Knox's arguments, inter alia; corrected in part by Gilliard 1993). This example points up how conclusions on ancient reading can be vitally important to work in related disciplines.

<sup>12</sup>The book expands upon ideas first presented in Saenger 1982.

ancient habit in all or most contexts, Saenger constructs a detailed cognitive model to account for why, given the fact of *scriptio continua*, the Greeks and Romans *could not have read in any way other than aloud* (e.g., 6–9). Saenger describes in detail the trials of the ancient reader who, without either word boundaries or fixed word order, found the task of decoding the text very difficult, a challenge which grew even greater in the case of literary texts, since they tend to combine less obvious meaning with greater freedom in word order. Under these circumstances, he explains, reading orally was necessary to help in the sorting out of the ambiguities. Saenger's goal in this analysis is to chart the "evolution" of word separation, so as to demonstrate that: (1) spaces between words, first widely used in the tenth and eleventh centuries, allowed for the first time a shift from reading aloud to reading silently; and (2) this change to silent reading led to the increasingly complex thought that characterizes the scholastic and subsequent periods. To make his case, Saenger must suppose for ancient reading an "orality and tunnel vision," imposed by *scriptio continua*, that "obstructed the rapid appreciation of the word within its syntactical context, making the comprehension of propositions *neuropsychologically* more difficult" (122, *italics mine*).

Meanwhile, in a paper published the same year in *Classical Quarterly*, A. K. Gavrilov ("Reading Techniques in Classical Antiquity")<sup>13</sup> uses some of the same evidence from the field of cognitive psychology to demonstrate that in *neuropsychological* terms the Greeks and Romans *must have been able to read silently*. In addition to pointing out the disposition toward silent reading among mature readers in a variety of cultures, Gavrilov details how the concept of the "eye-voice span" proves the necessary ability of any lector to be able to read silently: "the person reading aloud needs to be able to glance ahead and read inwardly selected portions of the following text; the more experienced the reader, the more easily and reliably they do this. That is why for virtuoso reading aloud one requires not merely the ability to read to oneself, but skill at it" (59). Like Saenger, Gavrilov is able to use "science" to "prove" the conclusion he brings to the investigation.

<sup>13</sup>Gavrilov's conclusions were already known to many specialists from reports of a similar article that appeared in a Russian journal in 1989 (reference at Gavrilov 1997, 69 n. 52).

In the same article, Gavrilov usefully raises doubts about the traditional interpretation of the passage from Augustine, in which he sees not Augustine's surprise at Ambrose's silent reading per se, but Augustine's puzzlement and irritation that Ambrose reads silently "in the presence of his parishioners" (63). I prefer to emphasize more the relationship of teacher to student, but in any case it does seem clear—once it is pointed out—that the "surprise" is occasioned by the specifics of the social scene in which this silent reading is set.<sup>14</sup> That is, Ambrose, as *magister*, is expected to share with his students both his texts, that is, his readings aloud (in a world where books were relatively rare), and his thoughts on these texts—exactly as Ambrose implicitly does elsewhere, as at *Confessions* 6.4.<sup>15</sup> When, despite allowing the students to come visit, Ambrose does not read the texts for all to hear and does not comment on the texts, the students naturally wonder why. Seen in this way, the scene may then be good evidence that, in this particular social context (of the *magister* with his disciples), reading aloud was the expected behavior. But the passage does not speak to general habits of silent reading one way or the other—and thus the once grand construction of Balogh collapses altogether. As a final kick to the ruins, M. Burnyeat appends to Gavrilov's article remarks on two passages (Ptolemy, περί κριτηρίου καὶ ἡγεμονικοῦ 5.1–2 Lammert; Plotinus *Enneads* 1.4.10), in which reading silently and concentrating hard are equated; thus proving that at least some ancient thinkers were not unaccustomed to the notion of silent reading.<sup>16</sup> Gavrilov's conclusion, to which Burnyeat appears to subscribe, is that "*the phenomenon of reading itself is fundamentally the same in modern and in ancient culture*. Cultural diversity does not exclude an underlying unity" (69, italics mine).

<sup>14</sup>I here renounce my use of this passage as central evidence for the reading aloud of literary texts in Johnson 1994; though (for reasons that will become clear below) not the conclusion itself.

<sup>15</sup>The scene at 6.4 is helpfully clarified and placed into the broader context at Stock 1996, 63–64.

<sup>16</sup>Burnyeat 1997. Again, this evidence was already known to cognoscenti, from a letter Burnyeat wrote to the *Times Literary Supplement* (Burnyeat 1991). Balogh 1927 was also aware of the Ptolemy passage (first brought to notice by A. Brinkmann), but he glosses over it: 105 n. 27; cf. Burnyeat 1997, 75. The Plotinus passage was first cited as a central piece of evidence in Stock 1996, 286 n. 53. To Burnyeat's two passages, add the list of "passages where silent reading is more or less certainly implied" at Gavrilov 1997, 70–71, though most of this evidence is more ambiguous than he allows.



But is this a proper conclusion? If we accept that the ancients did read silently, yet know also (what no one disputes) that they commonly read aloud, does it follow that ancient reading was really so like our own? Has this century of debate in fact brought us to no better understanding than that the ancient readers' experience was, essentially, ours? My interest lies not, finally, in entering the controversy over whether the ancients always read aloud. Given the terms of the debate—wrongful terms first set into motion by Balogh—I think that Knox and Gavrilov and Burnyeat have made sufficient response. I wish, rather, to redirect scholarly attention to what is, I think, a much more interesting set of problems: how exactly the ancients went about reading, and how the ancient *reading culture* (as I will call it)<sup>17</sup> does in fact differ from the reading—from-a-printed-book model familiar to us today.

#### READING CULTURE: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “READING”?

When Gavrilov speaks of “the phenomenon of reading itself” he seems to mean the cognitive act of reading. It is this, he states, that “is fundamentally the same in modern and in ancient culture.”

But is reading solely, or even mostly, a neurophysiologically based act of cognition? Anthropologists, ethnographers, and sociolinguists have increasingly come to recognize in reading a complex sociocultural construction that is tied, *essentially*, to particular contexts. In a now classic study of literacy in more privileged (“Maintown”) and less privileged (“Roadville” and “Trackton”) communities in the Piedmont region of the Carolinas,<sup>18</sup> Shirley Heath describes in detail the ways in which many aspects of reading are informed by the reader's subculture. Maintown children (51–56), for instance, learn from an early age to use children's fiction as a frame of reference for constructing real-world knowledge. While reading with parents and other adults, they learn school-oriented ways of using a text, such as interactive “initiation–

<sup>17</sup>I use the term “reading culture” to bring to constant and immediate attention the cultural dimensions of “reading”; further in the next section.

<sup>18</sup>Heath 1982, cf. Heath 1983; conveniently summarized, with illustrative examples from other cultures along the same lines (as, e.g., Clanchy 1979), in Street 1984: see the chapter “The ‘Ideological’ Model,” esp. 121–25.

reply–evaluation” sequences, which model the sort of give–and–take used later in formal education. But they also learn to value fiction for its own sake and to replicate it by telling stories that are not true. Moreover, they learn that writing may represent not only real events but also decontextualized logical propositions to be used in taking meaning from their environment. Children from Roadville (57–64), on the other hand, while they also learn certain sorts of school–like habits of interaction with texts (e.g., “what–explanations”), regard the text itself from a markedly different stance. In this working–class, Christian community, reading to children past the toddler age is not interactive but performative, and behind the performance is the assumption that the stories told are “true”—real events that tell a message. The fundamental relationship between book learning and “reality” differs: in Roadville, events in the real world are seldom compared to events in books; explicitly fictionalized accounts are thought to be “lies”; and the children are poor at decontextualizing their knowledge and applying it to different frames of reference. For our purposes, what is crucial is that the differing reader responses are engendered not by the particular text, nor by the education of the reader, but by the sociocultural context in which the reading takes place. The meanings that readers construct differ, that is, largely in dependence on the (sub)culture in which the reading occurs.

Recent anthropological and ethnographical studies, in an effort to avoid the sort of vague generalities that so often devolve from discussion of “literacy,” now frequently attempt more specific terminology, which seeks to refocus our view of the use of texts by the choice of a sometimes startlingly wide–angle lens. The resulting view could not be more different from that which dominates discussion of “reading” in ancient studies. Three prominent examples: Shirley Heath speaks of a “literacy event” as “occasions in which written language is integral to the nature of participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies”; Brian Street proposes, more broadly and abstractly, “literacy practices,” referring thereby to “both behaviour and conceptualisations related to the use of reading and/or writing”; and R. D. Grillo extends this yet further to “communicative practices,” in which he includes “the social activities through which language or communication is produced,” “the way in which these activities are embedded in institutions, settings or domains which in turn are implicated in other, wider, social, economic, political and cultural processes,” and “the ideologies, which may be linguistic or other, which guide processes of com-

municative production.”<sup>19</sup> Note how such terminology privileges study of sociocultural practices over the emphasis on a specific “technology” or “medium.”

Quite so wide a refocusing may, to be sure, make more sense for modern ethnographers than for historians of ancient culture. We do not have the opportunity to take field notes from living informants, and the level of specificity advocated (which may in any case be overwrought) is simply not possible. But contemporary studies have, nonetheless, much to teach us about the deep dependency between a particular “culture,” narrowly defined, and the “reading” of texts, broadly defined. As will already be clear, reading is not, in my view, exclusively or even mostly a neurophysiological, cognitive act—not in fact an individual phenomenon, but a sociocultural system in which the individual participates.

For clarity’s sake, and to help us begin to think this through, I list here some simple—if not simplistic—propositions:<sup>20</sup>

(1) The reading of different types of texts makes for different types of reading events. Reading a tax document and reading love poetry are essentially different events, even for the same person in the same time and place.

(2) The reading of a given text in different contexts results in different reading events. Reading love poetry in a scholastic context differs essentially from reading love poetry over wine with a lover. Reading alone differs essentially from reading with a group.

(3) A reading event is in part informed by the conceived reading community. Whether based on an actual group (such as a class), or an imaginary group (intellectuals, lovers of poetry), the reader’s conception of “who s/he is,” that is, to what reading community s/he thinks to belong, is an important, and determinative, part of the reading event. Reading love poetry in a given context (say, alone in one’s living room) differs depending on whether the reader thinks of the reading as preparation for class, or as participatory in elitist enthusiasms for high poetry.

<sup>19</sup>Summarized and quoted in Street 1993, 12–13. The quotations are from Heath 1982, 50; Street 1988, 61; and Grillo 1989, 15.

<sup>20</sup>Partly in order to avoid the political and other baggage that follow the term “literacy,” I will prefer the following terms: “reading” (by which I mean the experience of reading, broadly conceived), “reading events” (by which I mean to emphasize the contextualization of a particular “reading”), and “reading culture” (by which I mean to signal the cultural construct that underpins group and individual behaviors in a reading event).

(4) The reading community normally has not only a strictly social component (the conception of the group), but also a cultural component, in that the rules of engagement are in part directed by inherited traditions. A reader's stance toward class material is informed by scholastic traditions, some peculiar to the institution; more hazily, a reader's stance toward the sort of material favored by enthusiasts for high poetry is informed by a set of inherited, that is, trained dispositions (such as attention to intertextual references, or appreciation for certain aesthetic characteristics).

(5) Reading which is perceived to have a cultural dimension (most obviously, "literature" of any sort) is intimately linked to the self-identity of the reader. Thus a person who identifies with the cultural elite will feel disgusted, or even polluted, by the reading of a "trash" romance novel; uplifted, and self-validated, by the reading of difficult, but "excellent" literature.

All of these propositions have many ramifications, and the details could be argued at nearly infinite length—so complex is "reading"—but even this simple analysis should begin to make clear why I prefer to look at reading as not an act, nor even a process, but as a highly complex sociocultural system that involves a great many considerations beyond the decoding by the reader of the words of a text. Critical is the observation that reading is not simply the cognitive process by the individual of the "technology" of writing, but rather *the negotiated construction of meaning within a particular sociocultural context*.

An illustrative example from closer to hand may at this point prove helpful. When teaching ancient epic in translation (*Gilgamesh*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*), I have been deeply impressed at the high and general level of enthusiasm, indeed excitement, that the students bring to the reading of these texts. At least some of these texts are rather forbidding, after all, and not obviously to everyone's tastes. Moreover, not many of these same people, as forty-something stockbrokers or business executives, would on their own find these texts very engaging. Why is it that students commonly find difficult texts like Homer's *Iliad* or Virgil's *Aeneid* (or Dante or Milton or Joyce) so deeply exciting *within the context of a class*? As I see it, this has far less to do with cognition than with the construction of a particular reading community, one which validates itself through texts deemed important to a shared sense of culture and cultural attainment. In a successful humanities class, we are not so much teaching texts, as creating a reading community in

which the members find self-validation (as smart, cultured, etc.) in the negotiated construction of meaning from these texts.

But let us think through this simple example further, to see if we can gain a more vivid idea of what is intended by a "reading culture." How, in this scholastic context, does such a culture materialize? In part, the reading culture devolves from traditions maintained by the institution. Institutionally, universities work toward creating the disposition that knowledge of, and directed engagement with, particular humanities texts is socioculturally important: it is elemental (or so says the cultural tradition) to being "educated," a necessary item in the cultural baggage of those who aspire to the elite of the society. In part, though, the reading culture is contrived by the teacher. Individually, teachers work toward creating the disposition that a particular text (the one we are studying in class) is meaningful and relevant: it is a necessary tool if the student is to apprehend the knowledge, and experience that sense of meaningfulness, that bonds the group together as a productive, self-validating unit. Yet the "group" itself is also complex: not only the class, but also that more vague conception of people who are "educated" or "intellectual" or even "sincere." Part of the reader's conception is bound, then, by broad cultural influences well beyond institutional or pedagogic manipulation. In any case, the group dynamics—the construction of the attitude that Homer is *important*, that Homer *should* be interesting—are fundamental to this particular type of reading experience. Which is to say: the reading experience depends on a dynamic, continually negotiated construction of meaning within the context of the conceived group. Reading is, to be sure, the individual's construction of meaning, but it is never wholly interior; rather, sociocultural influences always inform the meaning that the reader seeks to construct.

In attempting an analysis of ancient reading culture, I therefore wish emphatically to promote two principles. First, we must proceed from a clear and deep perception that what we seek to analyze is an immensely complex, interlocking system. Even for particular questions ("Did the ancients read silently or aloud?") it will not do to focus narrowly, as in the recent debate, on a single mode of inquiry such as cognitive analysis. Similarly, the analyses (not reviewed here) of scholars like Goody, Havelock, Ong, and their followers—who find in writing, and in its reflex, reading, a "technology" with (various) determinative consequences for the society—will, from this point of view, be seen as

too simplistic, even reductionist, and too inattentive to the particulars of the specific cultures under study.<sup>21</sup>

Which leads to the second principle: that we must seek to analyze ancient reading within the terms of its own sociocultural context. Let us return for a moment to Bernard Knox's important 1968 article (summarized in the first section of this essay). Toward the opening of that article, Knox writes (421–22):

Balogh's insistence that silent reading was not just unusual but almost unheard of seems to go too far; common sense rebels against the idea that scholarly readers, for example, did not develop a technique of silent, faster reading. Are we really to imagine that Aristarchus read aloud all the manuscripts of Homer he used for his edition? That Callimachus read aloud all the works from which he compiled his 120 volumes of *Pinakes*? That Didymus wrote his more than 3,000 volumes and read the countless books on which he based them, pronouncing every syllable out loud?

"Common sense" rebels, however, because our modern cultural construction of scholarly efficiency is predicated on silent reading (a point central also to the arguments of both Saenger and Gavrilov). As it happens, though, we have a detailed account of the work habits of one of antiquity's more prolific scholars, the Elder Pliny. In a well-known letter (3.5), the Younger Pliny describes the solution to his uncle's (evidently unusual) desire for reading efficiency: he had a lector read to him over meals and scolded a friend who made the lector slow down to repeat a mispronounced word (11–12); when taking a bath he had a book read to him or dictated notes (14); he traveled with a secretary, who performed the same duties in any spare moments (15); to allow similar accommodation during the journey itself, he always used a litter in preference to walking (16). None of this precludes the Elder Pliny writing for himself (it is probable that he does: 3.5.10, 15), nor does it preclude Pliny reading to himself (though whenever the Younger Pliny is specific, he mentions a lector). But clearly, when Pliny looks for increased efficiency in his studies, silent reading is not, as for us, the "natural" solution. Rather, Pliny "naturally" turns to a scheme for insinuat-

<sup>21</sup>The problems of this sort of technologically determinative analysis are by now well rehearsed. For summary and criticism, see Thomas 1992, 15–28; Finnegan 1988, 1–14; Street 1984, esp. 44–65; Olson 1994, 1–20, 36–44.

ing more time into his day for servants to read aloud and take dictation. There is, in short, no “common sense” about it.

## TOWARD A MODEL FOR ANCIENT READING

We begin to perceive how large a task is at hand. Even the seemingly straightforward question with which we started—“Did the ancient Greeks and Romans read aloud or silently?”—is, strictly speaking, unanswerable: not only is the contextual grounding of the question unspecific, but the casual use of “read” begs the very point under dispute. The more proper goal, as I have argued, is to understand the particular reading cultures that obtained in antiquity, rather than to try to answer decontextualized questions that assume in “reading” a clarity and simplicity it manifestly does not have.

Approaches to understanding a dynamic cultural system are, however, by nature asymptotic. The very complexity of the system defeats final analysis, and all the more so when, as for classical antiquity, the details of the system are so dimly apprehended. This circumstance does not remove the possibility of better understanding, but we need to be clear from the outset that progress is by necessity limited—since this affects not only conclusions but also methodologies. In what follows, I will sketch lightly some ways of trying to analyze a particular ancient reading culture. The point of this exercise (and in this limited space it can be no more) is to suggest a strategy of attack, a mode of inquiry. Along the way, deviation from the ideal path will be forced at every turn, for the simple reason that the uneven nature of the evidence demands it.

As subject of the exercise, I choose the reading of Greek literary prose texts by the educated elite during the early empire (first and second centuries A.D.). The choice at once exposes the extreme limitations under which we must operate. First, the contextualization is far less detailed than we might desire, very far in any case from the sort of particularity of context available to contemporary researchers. As it is, circumstances will force us not only to be content with a much more hazy focus, but also to consider evidence as diverse as bookrolls from Greco-Roman Egypt and cultural behavior in Rome. Second, the “reading culture” chosen may seem oddly delimited. We understand by now that any slicing of a particular section of “reading” within a culture is necessarily not a clean cut, and that this is but an analytic tool for describing one part of an interlocking complex of habits, attitudes, and in-

teractions. But why carve off prose from poetry in this way? The answer, again, has much to do with the evidence to hand (as we shall see): a pragmatic solution to analysis, rather than one with strictly theoretical justification. Similar pragmatics lie behind the choice of the three modes of inquiry—cognitive, aesthetic, and sociological—I have selected, which are simply those that seem, on present evidence, most profitable to our goal of understanding how the *system* behaves.

First, though, a point of order. An awkward fact is that many of our most important primary witnesses to ancient reading culture are *written* documents: much of the core of the investigation here will center around the Greek literary papyri, that is, the fragments of ancient books that survive from antiquity. The focus on written materials raises, however, questions about the relationship between reading and writing. That relationship is a complex topic, but for the purposes here I will make a simple assumption: that a writing system largely reflects the system of reading with which it interrelates. A brief discussion of writing systems, though necessarily superficial, may clarify why I think this assumption justified.

### *Reading System and Writing System*

All scripts are inadequate in conveying prosodic and paralinguistic features like tone of voice, facial expression, eye contact, body language, and other elements that make spoken utterances quite different from written scripts. Writing not only records incompletely the locutionary act (what is said) but is poor as a conveyance of the illocutionary force (how the speaker intends what is said to be taken). Indeed the difference between “written style” and “spoken style” can be largely ascribed to the lexical elements that writing adds or subtracts, so as to try to get around the fact that it is not speech. But writing (whatever its advantages) is always to some extent handicapped by lack of the subtle contextual clues that personal speaking affords. In David Olson’s interesting formulation, “reading” becomes, then, in large part the reader’s attempt to project illocutionary force into the bare locutionary signals of the written script.<sup>22</sup> (And we now understand that the nature of this projection will itself be, by necessity, socioculturally informed.)

<sup>22</sup>Olson 1994, 91–114, esp. 92–93. The terms “locutionary” and “illocutionary” derive from speech act theory, first expostulated in Austin 1962.



An illustrative, if slightly silly, example of how a writing system interacts with its use by a particular reading culture is that curious feature of contemporary electronic mail, the “smiley face.” Since e-mail adopts as its working metaphor a chatty, that is, a “speaking” mode, tone becomes more essential, and (since e-mail is not in fact speech) the mistaking of tone becomes more likely. A particularly common problem is the conveyance of ironic tone, so characteristic of “chat” (and normally conveyed by tone of voice, a slight smile, a brightness of eye). Within the e-mail reading culture, the somewhat desperate solution has proven the smiley face, now the conventional way of making a light or ironic statement clear to correspondents. In functional terms, this new element in the writing system joins punctuation, formatting, and other writing conventions that help guide the reader’s projection of illocutionary force onto written statements. The smiley face is, then, a side effect of the way in which e-mail hovers between a written and oral statement, or, better, the way in which a written statement strains to be an oral statement in the virtual “conversations” allowed by the internet. This strain is felt in the breakdown of a part of the reading system (as readers feel perplexed by matters of tone, and project illocutionary force inappropriately), which leads in turn to an adjustment in the writing system.

Now, to return to antiquity at a leap, I think it fair to ask the following: why, if it took our culture only a few years to adopt the smiley face, were the Greeks unable for so many centuries to adopt obviously useful aids like word spaces, punctuation, paragraphing, and the like in the writing of their literary texts? Surprising as it may seem, the conclusion is hard to avoid that there was something about the reading culture that felt no need for these things, that in terms of the total system of reading, habits like *scriptio continua* and lack of punctuation worked. For we cannot suppose the Greeks too naive or primitive or stupid to think of word spaces or punctuation or structural markers. In ancient school exercises, word division and punctuation are often found.<sup>23</sup> Documentary papyrus and inscriptional texts often have elaborate visual structural markers, as needed. In early Roman literary texts, word separation is the norm, in fact universal so far as we know,<sup>24</sup> and it is a telling fact that in the period under review here the Romans chose to

<sup>23</sup>Cribiore 1996, 81–88.

<sup>24</sup>See Wingo 1972.

discard word spaces in the writing of their literary manuscripts—a choice they would hardly have made if it interfered fundamentally with the Roman reading system. Such a development today—the discarding of spaces between words—is simply inconceivable. Which tells us that the ancient reading system is in some way essentially different from our own. Thus intimately do the characteristics of the reading and writing systems interrelate.

Before proceeding further, we need however to bring clearly to mind what a Greek literary prose text looked like.<sup>25</sup> In the early empire, a Greek literary prose book was, of course, not typically a codex but a handwritten papyrus roll, held horizontally, and written in columns which were regular, left- and right-justified, and remarkably narrow in appearance: 4.5 to 7.0 centimeters (2 to 3 inches) in width, that is, only about fifteen to twenty-five letters per line; 15 to 25 centimeters (6 to 10 inches) in height; with a space in between the columns (the intercolumn) of 1.5 to 2.5 centimeters (less than an inch). The letters of the text were clearly, often calligraphically, written, but otherwise undifferentiated—that is, there were no spaces between the words. Main sentence breaks were marked by a horizontal stroke at the left edge of the column, but there was otherwise little or no punctuation. And nothing to mark larger structures: no paragraph breaks, no running headers, no page or column markers. The impression of uninterrupted succession, of a coherent whole, seems paramount: on occasion a reader might mark an important passage with a *diple* (>) in the margin, or with a bit of red wax, but nothing in the book's design either facilitated reference to, or promoted browsing in, some part of the text. The lines were divided rationally, at the end of a word or syllable, but otherwise the column was organized as a tight phalanx of clear, distinct letters, each marching one after the other to form an impression of continuous flow, the letters forming a solid, narrow rectangle of written text, alternating with narrower bands of white space. The visual effect was not unlike a strip of 35 millimeter film. The product seems, to the modern eye, something almost more akin to an art object than a book; and, with its lack of word spaces and punctuation, the ancient bookroll is, to the modern perception, spectacularly, even bewilderingly, impractical and inefficient as a reading tool. But that the ancient reading and writing

<sup>25</sup>See Turner and Parsons 1987 (for an authoritative introduction to the ancient book); Johnson 1992 (for full details on Roman era bookrolls).

systems interacted without strain is indisputable: so stable was this idea of the literary book, that with only small variations it prevailed for at least seven hundred years in the Greek tradition. The economical hypothesis is that the reading culture was likewise stable, and that readers were so thoroughly comfortable with the peculiarities of the writing system that adjustments (like our smiley face) proved unnecessary over a great deal of time.

With these final preliminaries behind us, let us now see whether we can make a modest start at comprehending the ancient reading culture.

### *A Cognitive Model for Ancient Reading*

First, some observations based on cognitive theories of reading, and focusing on a central feature of this type of book, namely the narrow columns of continuous text, one letter after the other without space between words. Saenger has, interestingly, raised the problem of the difficulty that an ancient reader would have had keeping himself oriented in this sort of text: this is the “tunnel vision” we heard about earlier. In modern analyses of the physiology of reading, the reader’s progress seems to go something like this:<sup>26</sup> the eye moves across the line of text not at an even rate, but in a series of fixations and jumps called “saccades.” At each ocular fixation, the parafoveal vision, about six degrees to either side of the point of acute focus, or roughly fifteen to twenty letters in most printed texts, is able to keep track of what comes before and after, and begins (or finishes) processing this data prior to the next saccadic movement. A similar span of fifteen-plus letters marks the amount of text that the eye keeps ahead of the voice when reading aloud (this is the “eye-voice span”). In modern reading, the ocular fixations occur at the beginnings of words, and the preliminary analysis of the script in the parafoveal vision is much aided by our ability to recognize a great many common words as a unit, as a “Bouma shape” (that is, the unique and easily recognized shape of a common word): no experienced reader ever, even unconsciously, analyzes words like “the” or “of” or “and,” since we learn to see these as a single form, a single Bouma shape. Now since ancient texts have no word separation, the Bouma shape is not immediately apparent, thus the preliminary pro-

<sup>26</sup>A more detailed summary of cognitive aspects of reading, with bibliography, is conveniently located in Saenger 1997, 1–17, 32–40.

cessing of the letters in the parafoveal vision is much impeded; and worse, since there are no word spaces, there is no “natural” point at which to fixate. Or so says Saenger. At best, he argues, this will slow down the ancient reader; at worst, it will lead to “ocular regressions,” as the poor reader moves back in the text from the point of fixation so as to find the start of a syllable or word and determine the meaning. In Saenger’s account, this process leads to a propensity toward reading aloud, and to very slow reading, which, by his analysis, inhibits certain types of complex thinking. But what arrests my attention in this account is the interesting coincidence between the parafoveal vision and the eye–voice span, both roughly fifteen to twenty characters, and the width of the column in an ancient literary roll, which is roughly fifteen to twenty–five characters.

What is interesting about this coincidence is not, of course, that the ancients used narrow columns *because* the fifteen–to–twenty–five–character width approximates the eye–voice span. Rather, what is interesting, or at least what interests me, is that the cognitive evidence may help us to make sense of the *system*, and to see why this system, so different from our own, was so evidently satisfactory in an ancient context: we can understand better, perhaps, the cognitive process as the ancient literary roll is being used. I suggest, then, a reconstruction along the following lines. The fact that words at line end were divided according to strict syllabic rules meant that every line of the narrow column began at a rational point, either at word beginning or at the start of a syllable (often, in ancient Greek, a morphemic boundary). The width of the column was such that the whole line could be taken in by the parafoveal vision, and approximated the amount of text typically read by the eye ahead of the voice. The result was that the line beginnings themselves provided natural points for the ocular fixation, and the “decoding” of the letters could proceed regularly on a line–by–line basis. Despite Saenger’s contention, it would seem that there were in fact good points of reference to keep the reader oriented; and the number of letters to decode in each line was small enough that we can begin to think more understandable the evident ancient indifference to the matter of spaces between words. To help with this were other factors: such as the extreme clarity of the letters, and the habit of signaling sentence end by a horizontal line in the margin, which helps keep the reader oriented as he makes his rather rapid progress down the narrow column.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Johnson 1994.

In general, reading cultures dependent on writing by hand seem to work as closed systems where the script has just the combination of characteristics to suffice for the purpose and context of the reading. For a modern physician writing a prescription, it is necessary only to communicate with a pharmacist: thus prescriptions are clear only in the points, such as the number of pills, that are necessary for comprehension by the other specialist. Similarly, ancient papyrus documents can be extremely difficult to read, since they are typically written by professionals for professionals and are highly formulaic in content: the cursive script often deems adequate a clear initial letter or two followed by squiggles incomprehensible in themselves, but obvious once one has sufficiently reconstructed the formulaic context. In ancient Semitic texts (Hebrew, Arabic, Syriac), unlike Greek texts, word division is usual since the absence of vowels otherwise would make the word division ambiguous. But for ancient Greek literary texts, what was evidently essential was not the marking of word breaks but the very high legibility of the individual letters, combined with a format comfortable for the eye-voice span, since Greek prose literary texts were, as it happens, typically read aloud. (On which more in a moment.)

### *The Aesthetics of Reading*

Cognitive functionalism is, however, but one part of the whole. The clarity of letters and the width of the column are, arguably, primarily functional, but the beauty of the letter shapes, and the elegant precision of placement for the columns cannot be. The elaborate care taken by scribes in the production of a literary prose text is exemplified by the remarkable fact that the variation in column width from one end of a roll to the other almost never exceeds 2 millimeters—only two to three times the width of the pen's nib!<sup>28</sup> The uninterrupted blocks of black text alternating with the white intercolumn in a continuous, precisely aligned band, has an elegant harmony that speaks loudly to aesthetic sensibilities. Such was the craftsman's art.

That the physical literary roll not only contained high culture, but was itself an expression of high culture, does not need to be argued at length. The product itself makes it fairly obvious. The craftsman's care has already been mentioned. Ancient scribes were paid by the quality

<sup>28</sup>Johnson 1992, 135–38.

of the writing, and almost all literary books qualify for the best or nearly best categories, thus are the most expensive possible use of a scribe.<sup>29</sup> The format squanders papyrus, itself an import item for most of the Mediterranean, with upper and lower margins much larger than function demands; in deluxe literary rolls, the upper and lower margins could take more space than the text itself.<sup>30</sup> The bookroll was, in short, an expensive, hence an elitist product; and with strict attention to detail in the layout and written in calligraphic or near-calligraphic scripts, the roll was also by design an aesthetically pleasing item to hold in one's hand and look at.

Unlike a utilitarian, documentary text, the bookroll was often used in a display setting: the reading accomplished by a lector, and in a social context such as after-dinner entertainment (on which more below). As a cultural signifier, the bookroll is analogous in many respects to statuary in a garden, or to the luxurious plate on which dinner is served in an elite household. The literary roll exemplifies high culture not just in the demonstration that the owner is "literate" and educated, but by means of the aesthetics the bookroll also points up the refinement of the owner. Moreover, the use of the bookroll, much like walking in a cultured garden or dining from a beautiful plate, demonstrates the owner's ability to integrate a sense of aesthetic refinement into every aspect of daily life and society—an important goal in hellene and philhellene elite behaviors during the Roman era.

In this context, Lucian's diatribe on the *Ignorant Book Collector* (*Adv. Indoct.*, ca. 170 A.D.) is of particular interest. There Lucian takes great delight in ridiculing a provincial from Syria who is wealthy, but not too wealthy (19, cf. 25), and who aspires to join the highly cultured elite. His aspiration takes the form of collecting antiquarian and deluxe bookrolls. But, as Lucian makes clear, this provincial is not part of the right group: "your haunts in youth were not ours" (3), which in the context means in particular that his level of education was insufficient for the high culture to which he aspires—that is, he was not raised as one of the elite. Throughout the diatribe, Lucian takes the position of a cultured intellectual, casting aspersions on the man who is merely wealthy but without culture. To the provincial he repeatedly opposes οἱ πε-

<sup>29</sup>Cf. *Edictum Diocletiani de Pretiis Rerum Venalium*, col. 7 39–41. The inscription is discussed in light of the palaeography of surviving papyri at Turner and Parsons 1987, 1–4, 23.

<sup>30</sup>Johnson 1992, 230–33.

παιδευμένοι (7, 22, 24, 28; cf. 1, 3, 29), those who are “educated” but also “cultured” (cf. LSJ s.v., and cognates like *παίδευσις*, *παιδεία*). The provincial can read his books fluently, but is unable to bring the proper meaning to the lection (2); he reads all the time, but doesn’t understand what he reads (4); he uses reading to entertain his toadies after dinner, but does not study the books enough otherwise to learn from the contents (7, 18–19); the bookrolls themselves are outstandingly beautiful, with purple vellum slipcovers and gilt rollers, but the reading itself is full of barbarisms (7, cf. 4). The provincial, that is, mistakenly concentrates on the beauty of the book as an object (4, 7, 16) and as a display of wealth and superficial education within his social group (19), rather than on the beauty and instruction of the text it contains (17). His behavior is, therefore, gross—his dinner parties descend rapidly into drunken disgrace (23, 25)—and his supposed refinement is a sham. For our purposes, what is interesting is not so much Lucian’s chastisement of a mental inferior—Lucian was, after all, one of the leading intellectuals of his day—but the vivid picture of a wealthy man who perceives the book as an aesthetic object central to his entry to high culture.

For Lucian’s wealthy Syrian, the elegance of the bookroll itself, and that refined feeling that comes from reading high literature in a social context, is enough. The operative analogy, again, seems to be that of an art object, such as statuary in a garden, where a pleasure in the overall aesthetics, and at the cultural refinement of the implied activity (i.e., walking among such aesthetic splendor), often overwhelms in importance subtle artistic understanding. Whatever the Syrian’s comprehension of the contents of the texts he reads—by Lucian’s account minimal (but this is a diatribe!)—he clearly delights both in the objective aesthetics of the bookrolls themselves, and in the aesthetics of the reading, conceived broadly as a social activity which, to his deep satisfaction, carefully mimics the high culture to which he aspires. From Lucian’s depiction, we may be able better to understand how it is that the difficult prose of a Thucydides, or of a contemporary like the Sophist Aristides, may have been of interest to a second-century audience beyond the intelligentsia. “Reading,” in Lucian’s portrayal, is an activity which to nonintellectuals is largely driven by aesthetic and social impulses. Lucian depicts this sort of “reading” (that is, listening to someone read after dinner) as a performance activity where the lector is charged with drawing out both the beauty and the meaning of the flow of words; the listener’s charge, by inference, is then both to appreciate the music of the lection and to comprehend. Importantly, enjoyment of

the lection depends as much on the beauty of the cadences as in the understanding of the words; and, as I have argued, on the aesthetic pleasure (and cultural self-validation) in the refinement of the book-as-object, the setting, and the activity.

Aesthetic and social responses to the reading event are, then, deeply intertwined, and for many ancients may have formed at least as fundamental a motivation to reading as intellectual apprehension. This aspect of the ancient reading culture is worth emphasizing, since in our own information age society analogous reading events are difficult to summon. By my way of thinking, Lucian's account seems to have more points of contact with contemporary opera goers than with contemporary readers. When Lucian complains that the provincial does not (as an intellectual would) read these texts apart from a social, performance setting, I am reminded of opera buffs who complain of those who come to the opera only as a high social activity (and by implication do not listen to opera otherwise). In both cases, the critics are not only too severe, but downright wrong-headed. The aesthetic pleasure, if not so deeply rooted in understanding as critics might prefer, remains (for most) a substantial part of the experience, and is undoubtedly enhanced by a setting which—aesthetically pleasurable in itself—focuses attention on the high cultural merits of the performance. Like contemporary opera, the use of literary texts in antiquity is deeply rooted in that sense of refined aesthetic enjoyment so formative in the interior construction of a cultural elite. Also like contemporary opera, the challenge of the performance, in many respects beyond much of the audience, is part of the allure, both insofar as it stretches aesthetic sensibilities, and because the very difficulty serves to validate the activity as one exclusive to the educated and cultured.

### *The Sociology of Reading*

To modern readers, the repeated emphasis on elitism may seem odd, even disagreeable. But in ancient society, that reading was largely an elitist phenomenon was accepted as a matter of course.<sup>31</sup> This is doubly true for literary texts, as the contents of these texts (often presupposing

<sup>31</sup> Ancient accounts betray not the slightest interest in diffusion of literacy among all social strata. See Harris (1989) (who emphasizes the lack of motivation, given the way that ancient society was constructed), esp. his opening two chapters.



a high level of education) make clear. Reading of literary texts was seldom associated with practical goals for individuals, such as the accumulation of knowledge for professional purposes. The bookroll's lack of structural devices that might assist in reference consultation mirrors the ancient reader's apparent indifference to the use of books for random retrieval of information. That does not mean that reading was not done for personal profit (such as to increase one's knowledge, to gain information), but rather that the reader's attitude toward what the text represents is subtly different. I will argue that bookrolls were not, in gross terms, conceptualized as static repositories of information (or of pleasure), but rather as vehicles for performative reading in high social contexts. Central to the performative reading were questions of status. Though the performance need not be actual, often it was, and in this section I propose to concentrate on the sociology of the actual performance of prose literary texts (which so far as we know almost always occurred in elite settings), and on the ways in which the habit of social reading—as-performance may have affected the reader's conceptualization of "reading."

A preliminary example. Earlier, we encountered an ancient writer, the Elder Pliny, whose attitude toward "scholarly" reading seems at first glance close to our own, even if his methods differ. Pliny, we recall, used lectors and note takers to help in his goal of compiling information (as, e.g., for his monumental *Natural History*). A singular detail of this account of Pliny's work habits (*Ep.* 3.5.11–12) betrays, however, an important difference. For the sake of efficiency, Pliny, we are told, customarily had a book read to him during dinner and dictated notes. But, to our surprise, we learn that Pliny is not alone with his servants: "one of his friends" asks the lector to repeat a mispronounced word—to which Pliny objects, inasmuch as this slowed down the reading. Now we do not know exactly what was being read.<sup>32</sup> But the (to us) bizarre combination of the scholar's task of digesting information and the "entertainment" of a performative reading to a group of friends over dinner deserves reflection. Though in some respects an extreme circumstance, the

<sup>32</sup>Pliny's remark that his friend's interference has lost more than *decem versus* does not imply poetry: *versus*, like Greek *stichoi*, was often used as a measure for prose text (see *OLD* s.v. 4). Given the nature of Pliny's writings (the nephew's letter begins with a full bibliography of the uncle's work: 3.5.3–6), the broader context seems to imply a text with technical or historical content.

scene helps to clarify the variety of ways in which reading may have constituted “entertainment” among the cultural elite. In this context, we recall the many ancient literary texts that are marvels of technical abstruseness but also composed with an elegance that seems to suppose an audience beyond “scholars” and “professionals”: poetic works such as Virgil’s *Georgics*, or the oddly popular *Phaenomena* of Aratus with its many adaptations and translations; but also a host of prose texts, such as medical or agricultural or scientific treatises, whose contents bespeak a technical handbook, but whose style often manifests a higher rhetoric. (The preface to the Elder Pliny’s own *Natural History* makes an instructive study in this regard.) In any case, for friends to get together as an “entertainment” to listen to difficult texts, including technical treatises, reflects a sociological aspect of reading unfamiliar to us, and yet apparently common among the ancient Greeks and Romans.<sup>33</sup>

Let us examine another example from the early empire. Plutarch, in his *Moralia* (1107F, *adv. Colotem* sec. 2) describes the reading of a volume by Colotes (“On the Point That Conformity to the Doctrines of Other Philosophers Actually Makes It Impossible to Live”): “While the book was being read not long ago, one of our company (ἑταίρων), Aristodemus of Aegium (you know the man: no mere thyrsus-bearer of Academic doctrine, but a most fervent devotee of Plato), with unusual patience somehow managed to hold his peace and listen properly to the end. When the reading was over, he said: ‘Very well; whom do we appoint our champion to defend the philosophers against this man?’”<sup>34</sup> The scene will be at once recognized as a common type, with obvious echoes of the dialogues of Plato. One thinks of the opening to *Parmenides* (126A–127D), for example, where in very similar fashion a reading by Zeno from one of his youthful works is the springboard to intellectual discussion by certain members of the group. Or consider the opening to *Theaetetus* (142A–143C). Euclides runs into Terpsion, and as they talk about the recently wounded Theaetetus, Euclides reminds him that he has written out a dialogue he heard long ago between Socrates and Theaetetus. Terpsion, who has had a long walk into the city, asks,

<sup>33</sup>This shift in attitude toward technical texts seems to be fairly recent, as I am reminded from a perusal of the papers of Ben Franklin. When sending his friends scientific works on electricity and the like, Franklin commonly chooses the word “entertainment” to describe the nature of his offering.

<sup>34</sup>Trans. Benedict Einarson and Phillip H. de Lacy (Loeb ed.).

"What hinders us from going through it now? Certainly I need to take a rest, since I've just come in from the country." Euclides agrees, takes him home, and once they are "resting" he picks up the bookroll, shows it to Terpsion, and then hands it over to a servant, saying "Well, boy, take the book and read." Remarkably, Terpsion and Euclides take for granted both that "reading" is a common, shared activity, and that, for the weary traveler, attending (and presumably discussing) a difficult philosophical dialogue is a relaxing and refreshing way to pass the time. Permutations of the scene where a prose (often a philosophical) work is read aloud, and the reading is preceded, interrupted, or followed by commentary and discussion, are familiar from Plato onward.<sup>35</sup> Scenes like the one in Plutarch represent, then, a literary ideal. But such ideals can nonetheless have wide influence on the actual habits of a society, and individual examples like Lucian's Syrian leave little doubt that people, even not very intellectual people, tried to mimic this behavior. The scene in Plutarch is important, then, as witness to a mode of reading behavior, but also as the sort of model that directs cultural attitudes as to how educated persons ought to interact with books. Some notable characteristics: (1) the reading is a shared, group activity, where one person (here unnamed, thus probably a servant) brings out the meaning of the text for the rest; (2) the reading is of a difficult text; (3) the reading is, at least for some listeners, not a passive activity—the possibility of interruption is real (though in this particular group not quite proper [*χόσμιον*]); (4) implicitly, the goal of the reading is not simply to learn what Colotes had to say on the subject, but to promote a wider discussion, an extension of the dynamic interactions of the social group; (5) the reading becomes thereby both focus and springboard to a mutually understood set of group behaviors that serve to build the sense of an intellectual community.

Despite the tenor of some recent comments in the controversy over reading silently in antiquity, I doubt anyone would dispute that the reading of a Greek prose literary text in the early empire frequently involved what is not so familiar today, a reader reading aloud to a group. This is not to deny that at times the ancients read silently and in solitude: that intellectuals sometimes did so is assured by passages such as those in Ptolemy, Plotinus, and Augustine considered earlier, and iconographic representations of the solitary reader may (though need not)

<sup>35</sup>Some examples and discussion in Allan 1980, 247–51, esp. 248–49.

imply a broader base for this sort of reading. But that the ancients commonly listened to a reader, and commonly “read” in groups, is too familiar to warrant documentation. Perfectly run-of-the-mill are passages, such as those reviewed here, in which we encounter a group listening to a reader, whether a trained servant (cf. Plato, Plutarch, Pliny) or a gentleman amateur (cf. Lucian); and the common use in elite Roman households of a specially trained *lector* (ἀναγνώστης) has been adequately demonstrated by Raymond Starr.<sup>36</sup> To be sure, there are some practical reasons for employing a reader. Starr suggests (343) that use of the lector got around the physical awkwardness of needing two hands to manage the roll, and that the lector helped masters with failing eyesight;<sup>37</sup> to which should probably be added the advantage of memory retention.<sup>38</sup> But whatever the practical merits, the primary motivation for using an out-loud reader was surely the force of tradition within the reading culture. The custom of out-loud recitation within a private, elite, social context has roots in the Greek tradition as far back as we can see. In earlier times, private recitation was mostly of melic poetry (as in symposiastic contexts), but the close association of a whole set of habits—recitation, group involvement, artistic or intellectual entertainment, aristocratic socializing, often over dinner—developed into a broad-based and long-lived cultural tradition, and thus influenced generally the ways in which literary texts, including prose texts, were regarded by the ancient reader. At the very heart of the use of literary texts was the association of the activity of reading with the elite community itself, and with the shared “entertainments” that helped to bind and validate the group.

<sup>36</sup>Starr 1990–91; other passages collected by H. Beikircher in *TLL* s.v. *lector* IB. Starr’s survey, however, restricts itself mostly to servants who are designated as *lectores* and thus encompasses only one part of the activity of reading texts aloud. In any case, as Starr points out (342), the use of a lector is so assumed that only happenstance preserves direct mention of the reader in the ancient source. See the helpful discussion of other terms for performative reading in Allen 1972; further useful comments and bibliography in Horsfall 1995.

<sup>37</sup>More in Horsfall 1995.

<sup>38</sup>In contemporary studies of schoolchildren, the children are helped in recall by the oral reading of texts, up until the age (twelve to thirteen) when the widespread use of oral dissemination of information is replaced by silent reading. This suggests that oral reading helps recall in reading cultures where reading aloud predominates. See Horowitz 1991, esp. 141–42. Memory retention is particularly important in a culture where books are not normally used for reference.

The odd format of the bookroll itself intersects with the fact that literary texts were commonly “read” in the sense of a small group listening to a “performance” by a reader. The strict—one wants to say obsessive—attention to continuous flow in the design of the ancient book interlocks with the idea that it was the *reader’s* job to bring the text alive, to insert the prosodic features and illocutionary force lacking in the writing system. The continuous roll was “played” by the reader much in the way that we play a videotape or witness a stage performance, and though excerpts could be “replayed” (cf., e.g., *Phaedrus* 228AB), in general one was expected to remember (or take notes)—nothing in the ancient bookroll was designed to facilitate retrieval in any other way. The reader played the role of performer, in effect, and the sort of direction for pause and tone given by the author’s paralinguistic markup in our texts (commas, quotes, italics, indentation, etc.) was left to the reader’s interpretation of the lines. Punctuation, if it existed, had no authorial force, and could be—was—changed at will.<sup>39</sup> A surprising amount of the burden to interpret the text was shifted from author to reader. Moreover, the idea of the “reader” is complex: not simply the reader–listener, but a reader–performer who acts as an intermediary, much like an actor rendering a play. The fact that sometimes, for the solitary reader, the intermediary did not exist, was no more important in the conceptualization of the text than the fact that today people sometimes read plays silently to themselves. Just as we, when we read a play, are conditioned to imagine the possibilities of the actor’s intervention, so ancient readers (and indeed ancient authors) were, I suppose, conditioned to regard the text not as a voiceless and straightforward representation of the author’s intent, but as a script to be represented in performance (whether actualized or not).

The conceptualization of the bookroll as a performance script parallels closely its traditional use as entertainment in elite society. “Entertainment” is without hesitation the proper word: several ancient sources enumerate *lectores* among the possibilities for after–dinner diversion, alongside dramatic players, storytellers, musicians, and the like (Pliny, *Ep.* 1.15.2, 9.17.3, cf. 9.36.4; Suet. *Aug.* 78.2; Hist. *Aug. Hadr.* 26.4). As already discussed, the entertainment is sometimes of a surpris-

<sup>39</sup>Turner 1980, 92; cf. Turner and Parsons 1987, 10; Johnson 1992, 110–11; Johnson 1994. Even though in the Roman era scribes often copied punctuation if it existed in the exemplar, the many casual additions and changes to punctuation in Roman-era bookrolls witness how fully the ultimate decision remained the reader’s.

ingly challenging nature. To be sure, the sort of high intellectual behavior dramatized in works from Plato to Macrobius will have proven more exemplary than representative—for many, the reality was no doubt closer to the half-baked efforts of Lucian's Ignorant Book Collector. But what seems certain, regardless of the actual merits of the activity, is that this sort of entertainment was integral to the self-identity and self-validation of the group, which was explicitly "cultured" in a sense that embraced the ideals of high intellectual attainment and aesthetic sensibility.

That reading is closely linked in conception with entertainment, and is thought of not as a solitary pastime, but as a shared activity deeply involved in the building of elite community, does not however fully contextualize the activity of reading. How did this idea of reading fit in with the broader contours of daily life? As prolegomenon (it can be no more) to an answer, I will focus, finally, on a couple of reports in the letters of the Younger Pliny which provide unusually detailed (however idealized) depictions of how reading and writing were integrated into the lives of cultured, philhellene Romans in the time of Trajan.

The portrait of Vestricius Spurinna's daily regimen given in *Epistole* 3.1 is particularly interesting because it explicitly (1, 12) sets forth Spurinna's behavior as the model for an elderly man of high status. The high status itself is remarked on (Spurinna, like Pliny, "held magistracies and ruled provinces," 12) in a way that suggests, as so often, a public rather than a private audience for the letters (Pliny's correspondent would hardly need this reminder). Spurinna's activities are marked both by strict regularity (2)—itself a sign of the man who "knows himself," who understands the moderation and self-control appropriate to the man of substance and culture—and by the elegant, indeed artful, integration of aristocratic behaviors. Among these are diverse types of moderate exercise: a long walk in the morning (4), a carriage ride and short walk toward midday (5), more vigorous exertion with a ball immediately before the midafternoon bath (8). The exercise, explicitly (4), is designed to invigorate the animus as well as the body. Alternating with the physical exertions are activities meant to divert and exercise the mind more directly. After the morning's walk, Spurinna converses with friends, but the conversations are *honestissimi sermones* (4), that is, ones with serious purpose and a refined quality. In addition to or in lieu of conversation, a book may be read, even if friends are present, so long as they do not find the reading burdensome (*si . . . illi non gravantur*, 4). The word *gravantur* suggests that the morning's reading typically

## Spurinna's Regimen

	Physical Arts	Literary Arts	Social Arts
morning	long walk rest	reading of a challenging text	serious conversation with group
midday	carriage ride, short walk rest	poetic composition	serious conversation tête-à-tête solitude
afternoon	vigorous exercise, bath rest	group reading of a lighter text	(lighter conversation, presumably)
evening	relaxation over dinner	performance of dramatic text	dinner conversation, <i>divertissement</i>

regards a more challenging text, in explicit contrast and comparison with the reading that follows the afternoon bath, which is of something *remissius . . . et dulcius* (8). The light physical exercise of the morning is coupled with more difficult mental exercise, which is balanced in artful chiasmus by the vigorous exercise (*vehementer et diu*, 8) and lighter mental fare of the afternoon. In between, Spurinna insinuates yet other diverse modes of physical and intellectual activity, for his carriage ride is accompanied by a different mode of conversation (tête-à-tête with a chosen companion, 5–6), and followed by time spent alone, in which he composes lyric verses in Greek and Latin (7). In most of these activities, the integration of his *amici* is seamless, for they are invited to participate or not, as they prefer (8). The day is capped by a dinner, served of course on dinner plate that is elegant but not immoderate, and the dinner itself is punctuated by literary entertainment between courses (Spurinna favors performance of comedy), “so that the pleasures of dining may be spiced by enthusiasm for letters” (*ut voluptates quoque studii condiantur*, 9).

The fascinating structure of Spurinna's regimen, with its combination of a balanced rotation of physical, intellectual, and social exercises, and a contrived *varietas* (three different modes of exercise, three of conversation, four of literary activity), is worthy of a poetry book, a refined garden, or in fact any “art” that counterpoises a unifying structure

with elaborate variation. The artfulness of Spurinna's life is not, I submit, happenstance. The artfulness bespeaks, in fact, the very nature of the ideal, in which the social arts, the literary arts, and the physical arts are tightly knit into "a more complex and organic *paideia*."<sup>40</sup> Not simple skill in, but the elegant integration of, all these arts is the mark of the truly cultured man. Moreover, like the doing of philosophy so central to Plato's conception of the life worth living, the doing of culture is critical to Pliny's conception of the ideal in this Greco-Roman society. Spurinna plies actively the arts of the body, the art of intellectual discourse, the writing of poetry, the social graces, and all with emphatic moderation and balance (as dictated by a wide stream of hellenic philosophical thought). Quintessential is the symbiotic combination of high social status with high culture: a man who was a provincial governor, but who spends his morning in reading of difficult texts and in serious conversation, who at midday writes lyric verse in both Greek and Latin, who punctuates his day with leisure forms of physical exercise, and who at day's end gracefully manages a lengthy social dinner that seems long to no one, *tanta comitate convivium trahitur*.

"Reading" in this society is tightly bound up in the construction of the community. Group reading and serious conversation devolving from reading are twin axes around which much of the elite man's community turns. The reading here described—of literary prose—is sharply distinct from pragmatic reading of documents and the like. Reading of literary prose, often difficult and inaccessible to the less educated, is part of that which fences off the elite group from the rest of society. Habits like use of servants to help with the lection, or group reading and discussion, are particular to the social group, and mesh together with other, related customs (such as routinely inviting friends to dinners with performance entertainment). Reading functions as group entertainment, intellectual fodder, and aesthetic delight, but sociologically plays a role beyond the sum of its functional components. As we have seen, reading is subordinated to a broader conception of culture, one which integrates a variety of behaviors, prominently including leisure, exercise, and social arts.

That literary activities nonetheless occupy a special place in the construction of elite culture is perhaps self-evident, but a final example

<sup>40</sup>So Petrucci 1995, 141, in describing similar behaviors among the medieval aristocracy in Italy. He describes, for example, an aristocratic lady who "had two couches of rich silk installed in the great garden and had brought there whoever played music, read, or engaged in fencing" (141; further examples at 143).



from Pliny may help make this more vivid. In *Epistle* 9.36, Pliny replies to a friend who has asked how he spends his days in the rustic environs of his Tuscan estate. Pliny's sketch includes the now familiar elements of a daily regimen varied by controlled rotation among literary, physical, and social activities: he spends the morning writing, followed by a drive and a walk (1–3); then practices oratorical reading (in Greek or Latin), followed by more physical exercise and a bath (3); next comes a dinner which, if only with his wife and a few friends, includes a book read to the group, followed by comedy or music (4); after which follows another walk with members of his household, some of whom are (he defensively assures his friend) educated and well-bred (*eruditi*), and thus able to offer varied conversation (4). The similarity to Spurinna's regimen needs no comment, but in this description, unlike that of Spurinna, Pliny goes on to mention one of the less artful occupations of his day. On some days, he says, he gives time to his tenants, "whose boorish complaints (*agrestes querelae*) freshen my enthusiasm for literary pursuits (*litteras nostras*) and the civilized works of life (*haec urbana opera*).” Note here that the disagreeable behavior of these griping rustics is explicitly opposed to the literary pursuits that, by implication, are an essential basis for what distinguishes the life and manners of the elite—the good life—from those of their inferiors.

### *Concluding Remarks*

In this series of sketches, I have tried to make better sense of the *system* of reading in antiquity, focusing eclectically not only on the strategies but also on the pieces of evidence that seem most helpful: What may be implied by physical features of the ancient bookroll like extremely narrow columns, or exceptionally fine craftsmanship? In what sense, and in what contexts, was ancient reading performative? What was the broader, sociological contextualization of a reading event? At each turn, I have restricted remarks to a specific component of the reading system, to a specific “reading culture,” limited by type of text (literary prose), audience (the elite), and time (early empire). None of this is as specific as I would prefer, though perhaps as specific as the evidence allows. In any case, it is important not to extrapolate lightly from the tentative depiction here to other aspects of the system. That the ancient elite had by the period under consideration strong traditions and other motivations to make use of performative reading of certain types of

texts may tell us little or nothing about how others handled these texts, or how the elite handled other types of texts. The reading of documentary texts, for example, invokes a wholly distinct set of sociological, aesthetic, and indeed cognitive behaviors. Certain aspects of ancient reading probably do have definable traditions that go beyond particular times or texts or classes of people. But in general terms it seems unhelpful to speak of "literacy" and "reading" in antiquity as though these were one thing for all groups of people and all types of texts over the course of a millennium. If we are to understand better how ancient reading differed from our own, we urgently need, rather, to frame our discussions of reading, whether ancient or modern, within highly specific sociocultural contexts.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> An early instantiation of some parts of this essay was read in September 1998 at a festival in honor of that best of teachers, Nathan A. Greenberg of Oberlin College. I here record my thanks to his continuing inspiration, as well as my gratitude to Kathryn Gutzwiller, Holt Parker, and the editor of this journal for help with the final revision to the essay.

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